

Rep. Rothman's Testimony before the Veterans Affairs Committee
Thursday, April 26, 2007

Let me begin by thanking the Committee on Veterans Affairs for allowing me to testify. I want to especially recognize the leadership of Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer. Under your stewardship, this Committee is continuing its important work in looking after our veterans.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am here today to testify about the moral responsibility and practical obligation of the federal government to honor its commitment to all of our veterans – namely, the commitment to provide them with quality, affordable health care.

It is a moral responsibility because the American government makes a promise to every veteran. We say that because you have volunteered to put your lives on the line for freedom – because you are willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of all Americans – because of this courage, we will take care of you when you leave the service.

We don't make that promise with our fingers crossed. We don't tack on fine print or attach a bunch of strings to the promise. We make that promise freely because our veterans gave freely of themselves in the service.

It is a practical obligation because how on earth can a young soldier fight with all of his willpower on behalf of a government if he meets a 60-year-old veteran who is battling cancer without any health care because he has been banned by his own President from enrolling in the health care service *for veterans*?

It's outrageous. Yet, as the Representative for more than 156,000 veterans, I have heard story after story from veterans in Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic Counties who tell me that their government has broken its promise to them.

That's because in January 2003, the Bush Administration decided to cut costs by telling veterans designated as "Priority 8" that they are banned from enrolling in the V-A health system and will no longer have access to V-A hospitals, clinics and medications.

The Administration defended its decision by saying that Priority 8 veterans make too much money to be worth the added expense. I say that's hogwash.

Hogwash because a veteran is a veteran is a veteran. Hogwash because we made a promise to those men and women to take care of them and there is absolutely no justification whatsoever for breaking that word. And hogwash because those veterans often live in areas where the cost of living eats up all of the income that the Bush Administration seems to think they have.

In fact, the national income threshold for Priority 8 veterans is \$26,902 dollars. I don't know of any town in America where that qualifies as Bill Gates-style wealth. And in

towns where the amount is slightly higher, it is still much too low to account for the high cost of living. Bergen County – which I represent – has the second largest concentration of veterans in the state of New Jersey and the largest number of priority 8 veterans. All in all, it is estimated that nearly 5,000 veterans in New Jersey alone have been turned away from the V-A health care system. Nationwide, the number of veterans turned away is over 273,000.

Turned away – listen to those words. I don't have to tell the good members of this Committee how terrible a message we send to young soldiers when we "turn away" 273,000 veterans from the V-A health system.

We "turned away" hundreds of thousands of brave servicemembers who said they were willing to die for the freedom of all Americans when they are at their most vulnerable.

The fact is that "turned away" is another way of saying we broke our promise. We broke our promise to 273,000 veterans. We broke our promise to people who said they were willing to die for the freedom of all Americans and we broke our promise when they were at their most vulnerable.

Imagine: You have a loved one who is 60 years old. He served bravely for ten years as a young man and afterward worked hard as a civilian for decades, raised a family. But suddenly, he is diagnosed with cancer. He doesn't have health insurance. He can't afford private health insurance. So he turns to the Veterans Administration to save his life. But our V-A says to him: 'Sorry, Charlie. You should've come to us before January 2003. We can't care for you. You're out of luck.'

Can you imagine? Can you imagine what that does to the faith of all our veterans in their government? Can you imagine what that does to the morale and trust of our current soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan?

It's not right and I believe this Committee must ensure that we stop breaking our promise.

That's why I have introduced the Honor Our Commitment to Veterans Act, which tells the Bush Administration that it can't just promise to care for our veterans, but has to actually *care* for them. I strongly urge the good members of this Committee to consider and move on this legislation.

Republicans and Democrats will never agree on everything, but we should all agree on the importance of keeping our promises to veterans.

As I said earlier, those promises weren't made with our fingers crossed behind our backs. They were promises made in earnest and they are promises that we must keep – for the good of our veterans and of our country. I will submit my full remarks for the Record.

Once again, I thank the Committee, Chairman Filner, and Ranking Member Buyer for your time and consideration of the Honor Our Commitment to Veterans Act and the very important issue of providing health care to all of our veterans.

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